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A TESTIMONY FROM CANADA

by

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PRESTON, CANADA

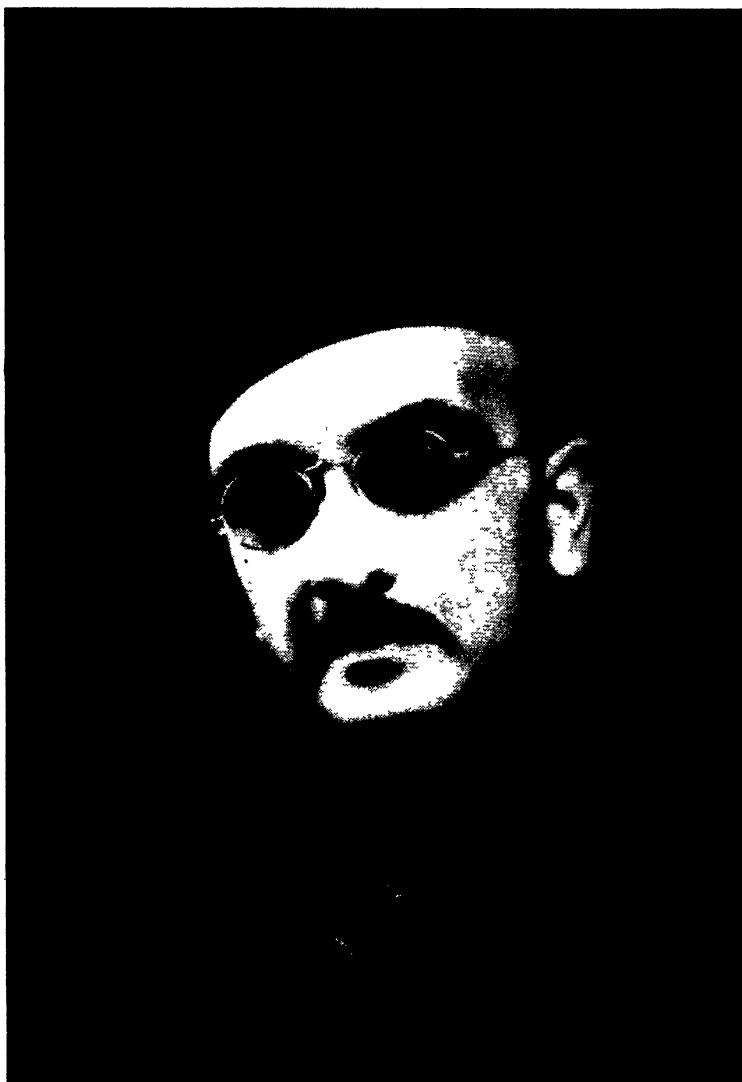
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AL-HAJ QASSIM ALI JAIRAZBHOY

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

A TESTIMONY FROM CANADA

In approaching an account of my conversion to Islam, it would be as well to relate my personal experiences both before and after coming into contact with its ideals. This is not so much to tell a story in itself as to show how the thought of thousands of other young Canadians and Americans is evolving and the opportunity that awaits an effective Islamic propaganda.

I can remember thrilling as a very small child to the Christian interpretation of Jesus' life, but yet I cannot say that I was ever truly Christian of my own conviction. Instead of absorbing the pretty biblical tales, I began wondering why so many in the world were "heathen," why Jew and Christian differed on the same Bible, why the unbelievers were damned when the fault was not theirs, and also why they could practice goodness as well as the self-called "higher" nations.

I remember especially a missionary returned from India stating how the "Mahometans" were so obdurate in adhering to their religion; that was my first encounter with Islam, and it roused an unconscious admiration in me for their steadfastness to their faith and a desire to know more about these wicked people.

An aunt of mine had the Eleventh Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica; it formed my first and for a long while only source of knowledge about these problems. However, those who know this edition will realize its limitations in respect to Islam, written in the main by unsympathetic Christian writers. As a result, I decided to study other religions but without much benefit. An American encyclopaedia belonging to my grandmother proved even less satisfactory. Public

libraries only contained prejudiced, harping criticisms, if any, and it was not long until I became rather agnostic.

Through all this time, I had neither sympathetic guidance nor friendly discussion. Adults would give very unsatisfactory answers to any questions I asked, or else flare up in anger if I doubted some unreasonable dogma. I was fourteen years old before any of my closest friends broached this subject I had long ago found taboo. In short, all my thinking was done to myself, and it is remarkable that my doubt was not harsher. However, there still remained with me a feeling that somewhere there would be something that would spiritually satisfy me.

* * *

Thus, four years this summer, I was reading in the *Toronto Daily Star* about the visitors to Dr Locke of Williamsburg, near Ottawa, and considerable space was given to Al-Haj Qassim Ali Jairazbhoy of Bombay. My interest was aroused, and I read in a subsequent article that he was distributing Islamic literature. I ennerved myself to write him, and after some time received a reply from Battle Creek, U.S.A., together with several tracts. Mr. Jairazbhoy also advised me to buy a copy of the Holy Quran, and on a trip to Toronto, I finally procured Rodwell's translation in Dent's *Everyman's Library*.

That autumn, I entered the University of Toronto. One of the subjects was Oriental Literature, which comprised a study of the progression of Semitic prophecy. The professor traced the development of the conception of God and ethics, and was very sympathetic towards Islam, having spent considerable time in the Near East. Mr. Jairazbhoy presented several of his books to the University library; this pleased the professor greatly as they aided his department, and he also guided me to other books in the stacks

Yet I remained unconvinced, although more than attracted. I could accept the main points of Islamic belief, I could say "*I believe there is no god but God*" with utter conviction, but

balked at "*I believe that Muhammad is the apostle of God.*" Rodwell's translation of the Quran, though beautifully done, did not enter into the spirit of the work, and I resolved to get a more comprehensive translation. I also read considerable other Islamic texts: Buddhist, Hindu, philosophic, social, etc., which my contacts at university enabled me to do. Then for the third year of college, my modern language studies led me to Montreal to perfect my French.

The University of Montreal (not McGill) is a distinctly Roman Catholic institution, and proved a marked change in my surroundings. The city of Montreal itself is divided into two classes. Anglo-Protestants such as I had left in Ontario, and the majority of French-Canadians, of a distinctly different character. Poor dwellings, little education, and inbred submission contrast with rich fortress-like churches and sacerdotal mansions. The people were being led with a hymn of hate against Protestants and Jews into blind fascism, or "corporatism" as the Quebec version is dubbed, and the youth were accepting unquestioningly regimentation against the "communist" menace. Few were thinking about the true causes of this discontent, rooted in the colossal burden of a top-heavy church system and a nepotistic government induced by an electorate not properly trained for an intelligent use of the franchise, lest freedom of choice and criticism be applied to ecclesiastical as well as political matters.

This over-elaborated form of Christianity forced on me how utterly wrong it was. Christ was held as the head of everything, under the strict supervision of a pope-presided hierarchy; God was almost obliterated by a host of demigods or saints possessing altars and idols to themselves; the priest was all-powerful, maintaining his influence through a scanty pseudo-education administered to the youth by incompetent church schools.

Could this then be what Jesus had taught? Clearly Christ

the myth and Jesus the man separated themselves in my mind, the paganized deity contrasting at last with the prophet of God. I saw Jesus had preached one thing, and the Christopagan of to-day was practicing another. The more I studied, the more I became convinced that Jesus was a Muslim, that his "kingdom of God on earth" was Islam, and that his teaching had been commandeered and perverted by the pre-Christian state church of the Roman Empire to perpetuate the ruling classes' control of the exploited masses. What, then, was Jesus' message?

In my first year course in Oriental literature, I had learned of the progression of human thought in its attempt to perfect its conception of God. Jesus had culminated the teaching of a Loving God. This idea had been lost in a cloud of liturgic doggerel and atavistic paganism; a beneficent, merciful deity had been obscured by an implacable overlord who could only be reached through an intercessor. Someone was needed to lead men back to the fountain of truth with its limpid mainstream of the One God.

Europe was still in the semi-barbarism induced by the folkwanderings and the extinction of classic culture by a narrow ecclesiasticism. The East was the logical centre of inspiration, and here Muhammad (God's blessings be on him) arose seven centuries after Jesus, when Christopaganism was firmly entrenched in Europe and rational study, let alone inspiration, still nine centuries distant.

* * *

At last I was able to accept Muhammad as apostle of God: firstly, he was needed; secondly, my own conclusions had been independent and still coincided; and thirdly, apart from both the former, realization of the divine quality of the Holy Quran and the Prophet's teachings flooded upon me clearly.

At the same time, I received and bought more and more literature upon Islam. Mr. Jairazbhoy had sent me *What is*

Islam? by H. W. Lovegrove (this is perhaps the most practical exposition that I have read, and merits wide distribution). Later he sent Maulvi Muhammad Ali's excellent annotated edition of the Holy Quran, and various other books and tracts. At Montreal, I was able to procure considerable French literature on Islam, both for and against, and this helped broaden my vision.

Since the day I signed my declaration of faith for Mr. Jairazbhoy, I have never regretted my decision. This bears out for me the words:

"When you have determined, then place your trust in Allah."
(*Holy Quran iii:158*).

This trust cannot be misplaced.

II.

So far this account has been mainly personal. Now I must conclude in a general manner so as to give fellow Muslims an idea of Islam as viewed from North America.

At the present time, the Islamic world displays a lack of cohesion and appreciation of its mission in life. There is enormous field for a spiritual Jihad. On a chaotic globe, man is swamped with formulae and slogans. Life is a constant striving against failure, and man cannot attain to his fullest perfection without a conscientious effort on his part. We must refuse to accept calamities and adversity but seek the reason for them, finding therein a guide and a sign for the future.

"Whatever benefit comes to you, O man, it is from Allah, and whatever misfortune befalls you, it is from yourself
(*Holy Quran iv:79*). Surely We have shown him (man)

the way: he may be thankful or unthankful (Holy Quran lxxvi:3). Allah guides to Himself those who turn to Him (Holy Quran xiii:27)."

Religion must cease to be a formalism and bubble forth from the heart. Our spiritual centre in Mecca should suffice in itself to bind us, and we should beware of strict adherence to a dogmatic creed. As F. K. Khan Durrani says, in speaking about the Hindu position in India:

"... When creative thought dies out in a people, they adopt the opinions of former generations for their religious dogmas and put a stop to new thought for all time." (The Way to Freedom, p 74)

Each of us regarding divine inspiration from our place in the universe, the limitations of our perspective and the narrow pride of our egotism should not blind us into belief that we alone are right and the world in error. We are on a pyramid dressed skyward; only when we reach the summit of perfection can we view the whole, looking down on every side at once. Our task is toiling upward, seeking truth and doing good.

"And He it is who created the heavens and the earth in six periods that He might manifest you, which of you is best in action (Holy Quran xi:7). The ever-abiding, the good works, are better with your Lord in reward and better in expectation (Holy Quran xviii.46)."

Help those near us mount, encourage those uncertain, and forget to differ.

* * *

However, Christianity presents much the same picture. Roman Catholicism is soulless, Protestantism lifeless. The former has been perpetuated by a machine-like system, steam-rolling itself over the exploited masses and hypnotizing them with an accreted mystic superstition. The latter has lived on

because it sought the truth, strove upwards towards the pyramid summit.

Yet Protestantism was only a halfstep from the paganism of medieval Europe, attempting what Muhammad (God's blessing be on him) had achieved so long before. The first reformers were mostly former Roman Catholics, and many of them ex-priests; they could not free themselves from the Catholopagan inhibitions shackling them. Despite this handicap, Protestantism has been steadily progressing towards Muslim conceptions, and its modern thought is largely Islamic in conclusions if not in inspiration.

Lack of effective propaganda to break down age-old prejudices (cf Dr. Malik's article "Islam in America" in the November-December, 1936, issue of the *Islamic Review*) invented by writers inimical to "Mahomet" and "Mahometanism" (which Christians define as a mere substitution of the Holy Prophet for "Christ," without further inquiry), and foisted on people incapable of finding out the truth, still hold us back. With all the means at our command to-day: the press, public libraries, the radio, and institutions of learning, we should conquer with the truth. The fault lies with us: we must act. The Western world must be jolted into acquaintance with Islam through a dynamic propagandization.

We must take not only the offensive, however: we must strengthen our defensive. If we fortify ourselves within, we can combat more actively without.

We must give back honour to our Muslim nations. They must be raised from their present colonial or semi-colonial status by gaining systematic control of their trade, both export and import, and of their natural resources. Foreign powers would then leave or show a purely selfish military interest in the countries; and this latter must be ameliorated by gaining control for ourselves through pacific means. Still we must

guard against creating narrow nationalisms motivated by selfish, unethical principles. A God-inspired League of Muslim Nations would not be far amiss. Its influence could be spread abroad by emigration. Christianity spread in the Americas not through strength of doctrine, but the sword in the South and Central portions, and settlement in the North. No Christian dare deny us the latter peaceful means.

Beyond the more material, there is our spiritual reserve. The White Fathers, for instance, are active in the North of Africa. We must found school for school, hospital for hospital, orphanage for orphanage, to combat them. We must show ourselves up to the situation and persuade the government through actual example that there is no use of Christopagan institutions in Muslim territory. If those in doubt could only see the parasitism of those priests and nuns in their homelands, they would think twice before giving the slightest encouragement to the system in their own country.

A hypocritical campaign of mock humility and uncalled-for service is calculated to awaken the sympathy of their victims. Ceremony and idols are to mesmerize the masses. The dead missionary de Foucauld and others will likely be declared "saints" to hypnotize those attracted to the charlatanry, Christian "marabouts" replacing those holy men the North African has honoured not so wisely as too well.

Any threat like this could be liquidated if we thoroughly educate our people, men and women, boys and girls, to the truth of their faith and the dangers of other systems; if we distributed literature, and especially annotated New Testaments to show where Christianity departs from Jesus, and how he was a Muslim; and lastly, if we organize ourselves to stand firmly together and help with time, money, and effort.

As for Canada, we need millions more people. In a land nearly the size and wealth of Europe, there is no reason why

Muslims should not augment the feeble ten millions here to-day and add another nation to their world. We must be careful only that any settlers are of the best blood obtainable, ready and willing to adapt themselves to the conditions of a new life with the least possible friction, and capable of being a credit not only to this country, but to Islam and the world at large.

Nor is there any reason why propaganda centres should not be established in the larger cities where anybody could reach them or be reached by them. Literature exists already, but more must be produced to meet the North American temperament. Brains can be found for the task of writing and editing it, and money to publish and distribute it. There is no reason why this or any other country should be ignorant of Islam. The chief fault lies with us for not making knowledge available.

The time is due for a Muslim Renaissance. The task is that much easier seeing that Islam has not lost its truths like Christianity, but merely some of its practices. A day when false ideals can make progress should not see true ones deterred. All proud of the name Muslim should work with a healthy, constructive pride toward this rebirth in order to combat the all too prevalent destructive creeds rending the world to-day. Preach Allah, the One God, and the greatest step is made out of this present-day chaos.

I view the future with confidence myself, and hope to play my small part therein. May you decide what part you can play in this great new phase of Islam, and—

“When you have determined, then place your trust in Allah; surely Allah loves those who trust (Holy Quran iii:158).”

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